

SHORT COMMUNICATION

A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL ENTOMOLOGY IN MONGOLIAN LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural entomology is the influence of insects on cultures exemplified in literature, language, music, the arts, interpretive history, religion, and recreation (Hogue 1987:181)¹.

The Mongols, once dispersed across much of Central Asia as a result of the successes of the thirteenth century conqueror Genghis Khan (1162-1227), are now concentrated in China (Mongolian People's Republic) and the USSR (Kalymk and Buryat Republics). From time immemorial, nomadic Mongols have lived intimately with nature. Thus, insects figure prominently in Mongol culture, where generally they are seen as small and ignoble. However, some insects, such as the butterfly, represent beauty. Butterflies are frequently portrayed in paintings (on doors of cabinets and table-tops) and in needlework and carpets².

In this paper we examine six insects which often appear in Mongol folklore, art, and literature: the ant, honey bee, mosquito, louse, fly, and katydid. Our sources include Mongolian and Chinese language materials dealing with folktales, poetry, and art.

THE ANT

The ant symbolizes working cooperatively, the dangers of pride, and the merits of hard work. In the tale "The Tiger and the Ant,"³ a tiger and ants fight. The tiger is soon covered by the ants and at last is forced to entreat the ants to spare him. The story concludes with the axiom: "Though you may be powerful, you are alone. And if you are small and weak, if you are united, you can defeat

any powerful enemy." This was relevant to Mongols in the process of empire-building and later, after the fall of the Yuan Dynasty (1270-1368), when they became progressively weaker and divided.

In "The Elephant and Ants," the dangers of pride are taught (Rinchindongrob 1987:108). An elephant saw many ants transporting grains one at a time and said, "How weak you are, carrying grain with such difficulty." The ants responded, "Even if you are stronger, you can't do what we are doing." Enraged, the elephant said "Let me do this work all at one time," then unsuccessfully tried to pick up the grain with its trunk. The ants said, "Let us do this work by ourselves. There is a skill for every job."

Another account showing the value of hard work has ants constructing a nest one beautiful summer day (Rinchindongrob 1987:162). A grasshopper at play happened to see them and said, "How stupid. While I play in this nice weather you work and can't enjoy yourselves." Suddenly it began raining, injuring the grasshopper. But the ants were safe in their nest.

The ant does not always appear so positively, however. Folklore says that the ant's abdomen is thread-like because it and a dragon competed with the winner destined to be the king of all animals. Because the dragon was much longer, the ant lay down and stretched. As a result, part of his abdomen became thread-like. The moral is that it is dangerous to attempt foolish things (Rinchindongrob 1987:141).

THE HONEY BEE

The value of unity is demonstrated in the story "The Honey Bees Battle A Wild Pig." A weary and hungry wild pig slept on a hive of wild honey bees who were away at work. One bee then asked the pig to leave. The pig replied, "I'm hungry. Lead me to honey." The bee returned to the bee leader and reported what had transpired. The bee leader then angrily led all the bees to the wild pig and told him to leave peacefully so that their friendship would not be lost. The pig replied rudely, "You little animals wish to frighten me, well, I'll destroy your nest." But the honey bees swarmed about, stinging it. In great pain, the pig could only run crazily away. The honey bees returned to their work (Rinchindongrob 1987:55).

"The Shepherd and the Honey Bee" (Degujia and Gowa 1984:410) teaches kindness. One day a shepherd saved a hive of bees from a flood. The bees thanked him and said, "When you are in distress, call us." Some days later a wolf pack attacked his sheep. Recalling the bees' promise, he called them. Many appeared and stung the wolves into retreat. Later, when he reached the age of marriage, he heard that a beautiful girl would marry. When he reached her home he found that her parents had announced that she would marry the man who could identify her in a covered cart among 100 similar carts. With the faithful bees' help, he chose the right girl whom he then married.

The above demonstrate a benevolent attitude toward the honey bee which is further confirmed by the common saying, "A place where bees enjoy themselves," which indicates a beautiful place with favorable weather, and as a result bees, which stand for cleanliness and beauty, come (Toronga and Urgan 1984:194).

THE MOSQUITO, LOUSE, FLY, AND KATYDID

These four are viewed differently from the insects discussed above. The mosquito symbolizes dirtiness and ugliness. It is a monster transformed (Toronga and Urgen 1984:141). The expression "A place where lice crowd" suggests a dirty and ugly place (Toronga and Urgen 1984:206). Also the expression "A net which a fly cannot even pass through," suggests something that is small and causes man to be ignorant (Toronga and Urgen 1984:94).

The katydid or long-horned grasshopper also exemplify ugliness and dirtiness (Toronga and Urgen 1984:254), partly because of the animal's large abdomen. However, in the award-winning Mongolian poem "Sound of the Katydid," the katydid is a nostalgic reminder of the grassland to a Mongol trapped in an unpleasant city life.

Sound of the Katydid⁴

On a hot summer's night	Katydid on the balcony
no sleep	singing
poems	crying ...
Little green katydid	Can't you be quiet
Why do you sing	As I am?!
the whole night through?!	Poor thing
Country animal—	
Moaning	
because of hot city weather?!	
Groaning	
because of missing your country home?!	
Upset	
because of missing every morning dew?!	
Groaning	
because of missing every evening grassland breeze?! ...	

CONCLUSION

Mongol cultural attitudes toward the insects which we have discussed may be summarized as follows: The ant symbolizes the benefits of working together and of hard work and the dangers of pride. The honey bee stands for unity, cleanliness and beauty, and the value of kindness. The mosquito, louse, fly, and katydid symbolize ugliness and dirtiness. As we indicated previously, this paper is the most cursory treatment of this topic. Mongols show considerable variation depending on the geographical area in which they dwell and a great deal of fieldwork is needed to be able to better deal with the richness of this topic. In

the future, we hope to further research this topic and also research Mongolian folk taxonomy.

NOTES

- ¹Hogue (1987) classified insects used in medicine as "applied entomology." For a discussion of insects used in Mongolian medicine see Narsu and Stuart (1987:7-13).
- ²For examples of butterfly patterns used in shoes and boots, see Inner Mongolia Museum (1987:84, 86-87). For examples of butterfly patterns in Tu (Monguor, White Mongol) embroidery see Ye and Cao (1987:68-69, 92, 96). For butterfly carpet, table, and cabinet patterns see Agewang (1963:2, 11) and Culture Bureau of Inner Mongolia (1960:39, 55).
- ³We thank Nasanbayer of the Inner Mongolia Social Science Academy for this translation.
- ⁴Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region's Editorial Committee of Modern Literature 1986:355.

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